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ARMENIAN VILLAGE LIFE
IN THE PLAIN OF KARIN

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*Who can foretell our future?
Spare me the attempt
We are like harvest reaped
by bad husbandry men
amidst encircling gloom and clouds*

John Catholicos
Tenth-Century Armenian Historian

This opening quotation, appearing on the title page of H.F.B. Lynch's *Armenia*, contemporizes the need to rediscover the past, which is the record of today's ephemeral future. The present essay is not a scholarly research paper. Rather, it has grown out of years of gathering memoirs and accounts of survivors of the 1915 Genocide who had one common denominator. They all were natives of the village of Dzitogh (Tsitogh) in the plain of Karin/Erzerum. Some escaped certain death by happening to be in the Russian Empire at the outbreak of World War I. Others were children who miraculously cheated death on the long, bloody forced marches to the distant deserts of Syria. They lived out their lives in various countries in widely different political and economic environments. Of the relatively few who survived from this large village of some 3,000 souls, most found new homes in Armenia, Georgia, the North Caucasus, Russia, Ukraine, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, France, and the United States. Because of the turbulence of the twentieth century, some had to relocate two, three, or even four times.

My early years were spent among rapidly assimilating, mostly Russian-speaking Armenians in the eastern Ukraine. The Armenian church and school of Kharkov were shut down during the Stalin Terror, and the most-promising youth found themselves in the Pioneer and Communist Youth Association (Komsomol). Still, the several families that had originated in Dzitogh maintained a special mutual bond, whether by a blood relationship, by employment, or by nostalgia. It was not until after World War II and our re-Armenianization process that began in a Displaced Persons' camp in Germany that life in Dzitogh became livingroom and table conversation. Since my father, Hovakim Kotcholosian, survived not only the 1915 Genocide but also the frostbite and wounds received in his service in the Armenian Fourth Volunteer Battalion organized in the Caucasus, his accounts of the first two decades of the twentieth century were detailed and vivid.

It was at the urging of his two daughters that Hovakim began to record his experiences, resulting in a long and significant memoir. It was then that I decided to seek out other Dzitoghtsis (natives of Dzitogh) around the world to ask each one to submit an account of his or her own experiences during that critical period. Some failed to respond; others promised to write but never did, but still others did expend the time, effort, and emotion to recount village life before and during the genocide and the difficult, often turbulent years that followed. On the basis of these contributions, I compiled, edited, annotated, and published in 1972 the volume in Armenian titled *Dzitogh Dashti Karno*.¹ Much of the information in the current essay has been gleaned from these accounts, together with a few published studies relating to the province of Karin/Erzerum.²

¹ Vartiter Kotcholosian Hovannisian, *Dzitogh Dashti Karno* [Dzitogh in the Plain of Karin] (Beirut: Hamazkayin Press, 1972).

² See Hakob Kosian, *Bardzr Hayk: Teghagrutian, patmutiun ev sovorutiunner* [Upper Armenia: Toponymy, History, and Customs], 2 vols. (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1925-1926); Hakobos Tashian, *Hay bnakhutiune Sev tsoven minchev Karin: Patmakan-azgagrakan harevantsi aknark me* [The Armenian Population from the Black Sea to Karin: A Historical-Ethnographic cursory Overview] (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1921); Hamazasp Oskian, *Karin u Karnetsin ev Karno vankere* [Karin and the Karnetsi and the Monasteries of Karin] (Vienna: Mekhitarist Press, 1950);

The *vilayet* of Erzerum was one of the six Turkish Armenian or Western Armenian provinces of the Ottoman Empire, while the city of Erzerum (Garin or Karin) was and still remains the largest urban center in the area. The region's importance as a critical military, economic, and cultural crossroads has made it a theater of perpetual geopolitical fluctuations. One constant and fundamental factor, however, has outlasted the sway of all incursions, conquests, and natural disasters. That has been the tenacity with which the Armenian inhabitants have clung to this mother soil since antiquity. Adapting to the ever-changing social, economic, and political environment, the agrarian population of Karin remained deeply rooted in this land.

Because of the turbulence of the Armenian experience, there is no uninterrupted narrative history of Karin. Hence, oral tradition, with its unbroken chain extending from generation to generation, becomes ever more valuable. But this indigenous repository, which was preserved largely by the peasantry, was abruptly and irreversibly severed in 1915. Even the record of that great crime became the victim of a malevolent process.

The Plain of Karin

To the north of the elevated, once-walled fortress city of Karin/Erzerum unfolds a picturesque plain, running about 35 miles east to west and 25 miles north to south (60 by 40 kilometers). It is bounded by high mountains and watered by the upper branch of the Euphrates River, the Sev Jur (Turkish: Kara Su, meaning Black Water) and its many tributaries. It is known by this name because when the ice breaks in the spring, the gushing water is very murky, but soon the river becomes sparkling clear and pure. The highland plain, at an altitude of around 6,000 feet or nearly 2,000 meters, has been described by early travelers and explorers as a sanctuary of never-before-seen hues and flowers, a bird

Ghazar Chareg, *Karinapatum: Hushamatian Bardzr Hayki* [Karin: Memorial Volume of Upper Armenia] (Beirut: Garin Compatriotic Unions of the United States and Lebanon, 1957); Hratch A. Tarbassian, *Erzurum (Garin): Its Armenian History and Traditions* ([New York]: Garin Compatriotic Union of the United States, 1975); Hovhannes Zatikyan, *Karin* (Erevan: Hayastan, 1992).

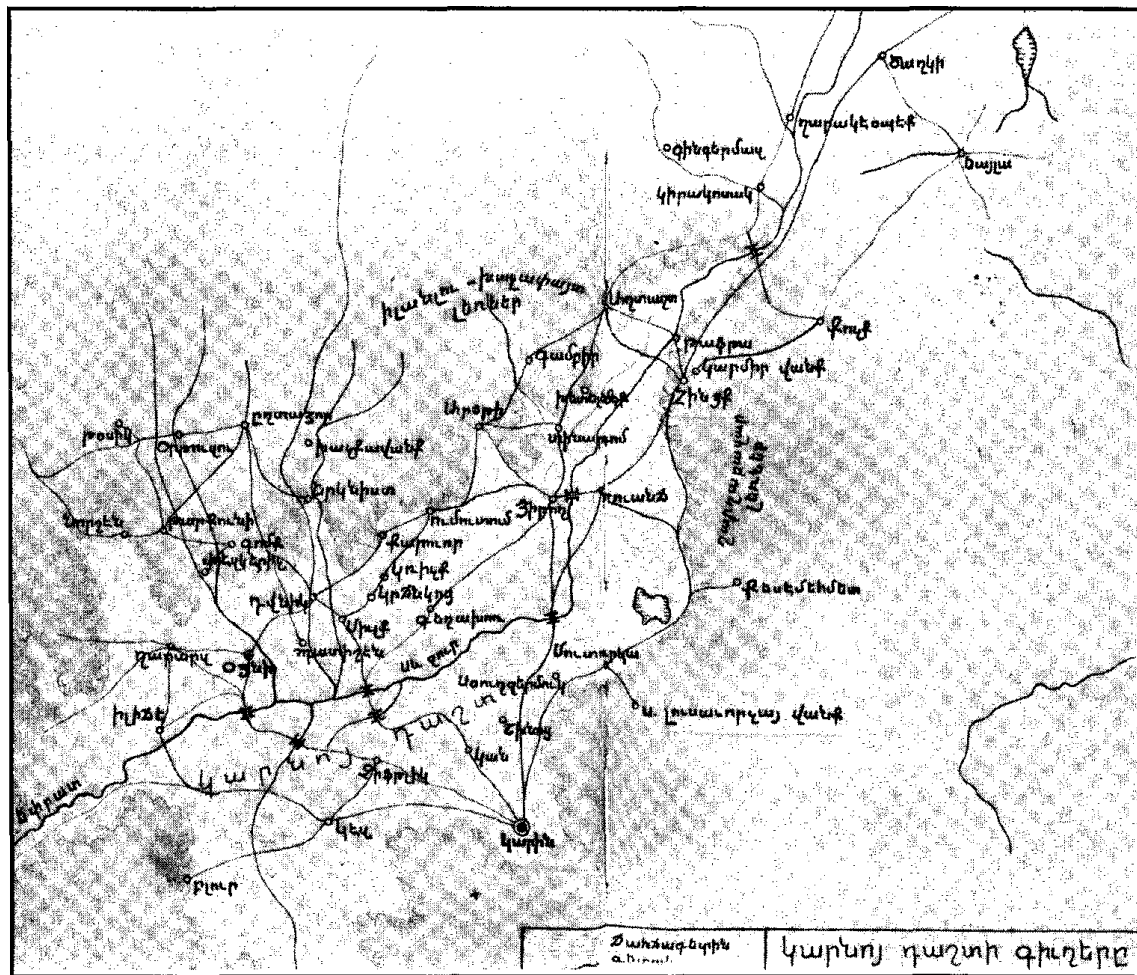
paradise (some 170 varieties were listed by Robert Curzon in the nineteenth century),³ a water wonderland with brooks, streams, waterfalls, and hot springs, and an area rich in untapped mineral deposits. The plain of Karin has been called an open-air museum, containing numerous religious edifices, some of which may still be seen in a vandalized state.

In studying the foundations of rural Armenia, an imposing reality becomes evident, that is, the symbiosis of church and people. That deep-rooted relationship survived centuries of devastating foreign incursions and conquests. It was disrupted, however, by the unprecedented violence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Then history suddenly stops in 1915 and its study is forced to conform to the dictates of an unrepentant regime. The extirpation of an entire people is followed by the attempted obliteration of a thick cultural layer and the digging in its place of a deep "memory hole."

Military and political vicissitudes notwithstanding, Armenians remained rooted for centuries in some 100 villages of the plain of Karin. The brief Russian occupation in 1828-29 was followed by an Armenian exodus prompted by growing socioeconomic oppression. The renewed exodus after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 and the Hamidian massacres of 1895-96 resulted in a further decrease of the Armenian element. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, only about 50 villages were left, many with mixed Armenian and Turkish or else Islamized inhabitants.

The following Armenian composite sketch map of the villages of the plain of Karin is based on information provided by the last generation of Armenians to have lived there. The map happened to serve as a guide for a group of California educators who in 1995 set out to discover their roots in the historic Armenian provinces now in Turkey, especially in view of the fact that official publications and tourist brochures intentionally omit any reference to these places and their former inhabitants. For the

³ Robert Curzon, *Armenia: A Year at Erzerum, and on the Frontiers of Russia, Turkey, and Persia* (London: John Murray, 1854), pp. 150-54. The list is divided into the following categories: Raptores (Birds of Prey); Insepores (Perchers); Scansores (Climbers); Rasores (Gallinaceous Birds); Gralle (Waders); Palmepedes (Web-Footed Birds).



teachers, the pilgrimage to their parents' extinguished hearths became a contemporary lesson in political reality and reinforced the trauma caused by the state's concerted efforts to erase the record of the ages-long Armenian presence in the region.

The use of oral tradition and memoir literature provides vital information about village life. Moreover, these genres transcend changing boundaries, as demonstrated by comparative research into local, neighboring, and distant cultures. Unexpected commonalities and cross-cultural similarities between these peoples surface in mythology, philology, art, and other areas. A glimpse into the life of the villages of Karin supports that observation, while revealing the distinct colorama of Karin within the elusive rainbow of the universe. The village of Dzitogh may be used as the basis for examining the way of life in the plain of Karin/Erzerum.

Dzitogh in the Plain of Karin

Dzitogh was one of the largest Armenian villages of the plain, having some 300 hearths. Located about a three-hours' walk from Erzerum city to the northeast, it was situated in a low-lying position between a large swamp and marshland called the *shamp* and one of the tributaries of the Euphrates. Water was always abundant, although the village did not have fresh water springs and depended on a large communal well known as *tulumba* for drinking water. From the vegetation in the shamp, the villagers made mats, cushions, and other products, used dried reeds to cover their roofs, and gathered feed for their animals. They hunted small animals and eggs amid the reeds and enjoyed an abundance of fish in the summer when the receding water level created numerous large and small ponds. The arable land of Dzitogh was insufficient for such a large village, especially as some fields were kept fallow on a rotating basis. There was a complex pattern of land ownership, with some peasants holding title to their plot of land, others being share-croppers on lands that had come under the control of Turkish notables called *begs*, and quite a few having no land of their own because of usurpation and therefore having to work as hired hands (*maraba*). The shortage of land and deteriorating socioeconomic and political

conditions compelled many young men to seek their fortunes in Russia, where more often than not they were employed in or became proprietors of bakeries. Not all Dzitoghtsis were farmers but rather made their living as skilled artisans—blacksmiths, carpenters, masons, tanners, weavers, tailors, and weapon makers—and were also able to meet the needs of surrounding smaller settlements. One street in the northern quarter of Dzitogh had several shops and served as a marketplace.

There are several versions relating to the name of the village, one of the most popular being that it was the place where pilgrims left their horses (Dzi-togh or Dzi-toghk) en route to the nearby Monastery of Madnavank (Matnavank). It is believed that the village belonged to that monastery or to the more famed Karmir Vank near Hindzk (Hints), another large Armenian village. Whereas down through the centuries some of the nearby villages had converted to Islam and become Turkified, Dzitogh maintained its Christian faith. It was always alert to potential danger from the neighboring predominantly Muslim settlements of Tvanj, Dinarkom (Dinargom), and Umudum. The spirited nature of the Dzitoghtsis was well known in the area and just as the villagers proceeded cautiously in groups when journeying to and from the city, so, too, did the Turkish travelers go out of their way to avoid the bounds of Dzitogh.

Climate largely dictated the course of life in Dzitogh and all of the plain, which is surrounded by mountain ranges that give rise to the Euphrates and several other rivers. This high plateau is blanketed with snow for nearly half of the year. Before contemporary times, therefore, life virtually came to a standstill during the long winter, interrupted only by the foreboding howl of ravenous wolves. A mandatory lifesaving semi-hibernation set in during which the children were trundled off to school and, after the livestock was fed and the cows milked, there was much time for rest and story-telling. Those who ventured out for long had to wrap their heads in a heavy wool shawl known as a *ghapalagh* and to wear wool or leather gloves, several layers of socks and clothing, and an outer sheepskin coat with the wool turned inward and the hide, dyed red or yellow, turned outward. Not surprisingly, constant care had to be taken to avoid frostbite.

Nature dictating the course of life, there were recognized

omens portending all kinds of events. For example, when in early spring the stork returned to the village with a bloody rag in its beak, war was imminent; if a dead lizard or rodent was held, another massacre was in the making; if it was a husk or leaf, the grain harvest would be bountiful. When enjoying a respite from hard work or hard times, the light-hearted peasant would spontaneously break out into song and fervent dance, both the ceremonial solo and the energetic, intricate steps of group dancing. There was an incisive sense of humor and a tendency to make fun of the traits of the inhabitants of other villages as, for example, in the rhymed verse nicknaming the various villages in the plain of Karin. The accompanying table in Armenian gives sample stanzas sung in unison during a slow circle dance, accompanied by *daul* and *zurna* (drum and reed flute).

The Work Cycle

The spring and summer seasons were filled with arduous labor in a cycle of plowing, sowing, cultivating, reaping, and threshing, interrupted briefly by festivals, in the age-old pattern of eking out a living from Mother Earth. There were no trees in Dzitogh, where the majority of the peasantry was occupied in growing grain—wheat, barley, oats, and rye, while other villages were noted for their livestock and dairy culture or for their vegetable gardens and orchards. As soon as the ice cracked and the roofs were cleared of snow, the animals were taken out of their indoor stables to become acclimated to the brisk air. Following a light-hearted celebration with joyous dancing to the sound of the *daul-zurna* to mark the approach of spring and to beckon all to come out of their winter hideaways, the villagers began to prepare the hard ground with crude plows. When the time had come to sow the fields, which had to be completed by the end of April to have a full harvest, the eldest male member of the family would perform the ritual of facing to the east, blessing himself, and kissing the soil three times. Beseeching God, he would take handfuls of grain from his apron, scattering the seed right and left while exclaiming, "This one for the birds; this one for the government, this one for the church," and so forth until the last handful he claimed for his own family.

Stanzas of Light-Hearted Village Song

Երգրումը մեծ նահանգ է
Մեծ ու փոքր գիւղեր ունի
Բարձր ու ցած տներ ունի
Երկար ու կարճ մարդիկ ունի
Ամէն մի գիւղ անուն ունի:

Արծթի բարձր տեղ է
Ջուրը եիւանդի դեղ է
Ուզող – ուզողին չեն տար
Այս ինչ անօրէն գեղ է:

Խաչկավանքը ուխտի տեղ է
Թաւմաճորը մօի տեղ է
Սրտաճորը սէյրի տեղ է
Քեսէմեհմէտ բուրբի գեղ է
Իլիմէ սէյրի տեղ է
Արեւ չունի Գինկերմազը:

Քուզայ քաղնոյ (Երգրումցիք) քաղքեցիք
Ոսկոր կրծող ուստա կանցիք
Ջիլ կրծող են Մուսուրկեցիք
Գորտի մանառ Գիխախորցիք (կամ)
Կախ-կախ ոռ են Գիխախորցիք
Ձիքոտ կոնակ Ումուտումցիք
Սարի սինրիլ Ըզտաճորցիք (կամ)
Ազա շալվար Ըզտաճորցիք
Քէլի Խամազ Թարբունցիք (կամ)
Թարբէ չունեն Թարբունցիք
Կուշտո կոնակ Գամբցիք
Պատ շարոզ են Պատիշէնցիք (կամ)
Պարծենկոտ են Պատիշէնցիք
Ուստա մարդիկ են Դվնիկցիք (կամ)
Փուռչուռուզ ուտող են Դվնիկցիք

Ղարաչուխայ Օճնեցիք (կամ)
Կախ-կախ շալվար են Օճնեցիք
Սիսլի Խաղնոյ Ղարաքցիք
Փուռչուռուզի գող Կեզացիք
Էշ վոնտոյ Զիֆթիկցիք
Բորակ լիզող Սուղչերմուկցիք
Մօրուք չունեն Քեսէմեհմէտցիք
Թուրքի վաստակ Թուամեցիք
Դիրսէլ ծակող Հնճացիք
Փոխինդ ուտող Տիմարգումցիք
Ճիգեար ուտող Թաւմաճորցիք
Երկար բոյով են Կրիշցիք
Կրիլի չունեն Երկնիստցիք
Մարապա են Ապրիկոսցիք
Ջերմուկ ունեն Խիմեցիք
Սամին ուտող Ղըզլիֆիլիսցիք
Կաթուիլ են Շիփէկցիք
Հաւ գողցող են Խէսէլէմէկցիք
Մատաղ ուտող են Խաչկավանքցիք
Լախան ուտող են Կրննկոցցիք
Սոված փորով են Մաղկեցիք
Գարի Խոց ուտող Կարակէօպէկցիք
Շաղկամ ուտող են Շիմեցիք
Խորոզ խաղցնող Ղուտնիցիք
Լոյսի տեղ է Կարմիր վանք
Կարմիր քարի տեղ է Գամսիք
Ազա շալվար են Ձիքոզցիք
Կախ շալվար են Ձիքոզցիք
Ջամ Ձիքոզցիք, Խար Ձիքոզցիք
Ոսկի կախող են Ձիքոզցիք:

From May until August, the oxen and horses needed for farm-work grazed in the village pasture, but almost all of the cattle (the village had no sheep) were taken to Dzitogh's distant mountainous summer campsite (*yaila*) to escape the oppressive heat and mosquito infestation and allow the cattle to graze in the lush alpine meadows. There were also traditional celebrations at the *yaila*, but it was necessary to be ever-alert to lurking danger and sometimes to ward off wild animals and predatory bands and nomads. In the village, meanwhile, some members of the household weeded and tended the fields under the scorching summer sun, and others, with sickles in hand, cut the grass and plants that had grown tall in a part of the pasture and at the edge of the shamp. Women and children raked and spread the grass to dry and then bundled and carted it to the hay loft for winter feed. At the end of July, the first grain to ripen was oats, followed by winter wheat, rye, spring wheat, and linseed. The sheaths of grain were carted to the threshing ground (*gal*), where the primitive rotating wheel was drawn by two oxen or cows or a single horse. Then followed the separation of chaff from the grain with pitchforks and sifters. The harvest had to be in by September before the sudden arrival of winter. By that time the herdsmen and helpers who had taken the animals to *yaila* returned with the cows, new calves, and large quantities of cheese and butter for the winter season. Women of the household, aside from daily baking in the clay oven—*tonir*—and other chores, busily prepared all sorts of preserves—pickles, cabbage, tomato, turnip, cured beef, boiled beef in lard-filled crocks, dried fruit, and so forth.

The Household

In the plain of Karin, dwellings were built to keep out both the cold and hostile elements, including the hungry wolf, the deadly antagonist in local lore. Stone was used for building near the foothills where it was abundant, while in the central plain clay and sun-baked brick predominated as building materials. Stone and wood pillars (some decorated with the carved initials of the family) supported the roof beams, the spaces being filled with branches and reeds, which were plentiful in the centrally located

great swampland, the shamp, which once had been a lake. The soil that was excavated in preparing the foundation of the house was used to cover the roof. The flat roofs of adjoining houses were connected, thus creating a continuous surface for an extensive block of homes, at a second-storey level. Small outlets in the roofs made possible communication among the inhabitants during the snowbound winter and at times of hostile intrusions. The stable, which was divided into separate corrals for each kind of animal, the hayloft or barn, and the storage room (*maran*) were all connected with the living quarters for pragmatic reasons—security, economy of space, and heating. The entrance to each structure was from an inner courtyard. In the storage room were both utensils and food for the household, including strung vegetables, garlic, and grain. The living quarters were divided into a baking room with its tonirs, a central room with an eating area, one or more rooms with high or low lofts for sleeping, a place for carpets, mats, and pillows, and often an upper room with cradles for the babes of the extended family.

Karin peasants dressed simply, reflecting their meager means. Men normally wore coarse dark pants with a blue jacket, a belt and perhaps a red shawl and a red fez. Like villagers everywhere they wore moccasin-like leather footgear known as *drekh*, which they removed at the entrance to the living quarters. Women dressed in long skirts with a red or dark-colored breast-plate, long sleeves, an ankle-length apron, and a decorated headpiece known as a *yazma*. Unlike Muslim women, they ordinarily did not wear a full body covering and veil.

Political and economic factors and deep-rooted traditional values may explain in part the fact that the Armenian rural family was the largest among all other surrounding ethno-religious communities. In the village, it was not at all uncommon for a family of more than thirty members of three or four generations to live under a single roof. While the family was patriarchal in structure, a widow or older woman would assume the role of head of household when there were no sons ready for that responsibility.

The multi-member household had a built-in division of labor. In the field, men toiled with primitive implements; a pair of oxen would spare many a back and raise the family's social status.

Women, too, worked from dawn to dusk, both in home and field. An unwritten code of family relationships with specific domestic chores was in place—cleaning and washing, child care, daily baking, cooking, preparing preserves and staples for winter, and weaving (larger families had their own loom). Even children participated in this hierarchy of labor by delivering simple meals to the workers in the field.

The tradition of village self-reliance was based on communal cooperation. Many families had barely enough milk for their daily needs, especially for culturing *matsun* (yogurt), a staple of the Armenian diet. Not having sufficient milk to make cheese and butter for themselves, the villagers developed an efficient economic practice known as *khab*. For a certain period of time, a cluster of families would deliver most of their daily milk to a designated family, which would be able to produce in bulk from the large volume of milk thus collected. Each participating family would then receive the final product proportional to the amount of milk contributed. The *hokhank* was another occasion for mutual help. When a peasant completed building the walls of a new house and the installation of the roof was next, the town crier would summon the entire village. Those who were able, with shovel in hand, hastened to cover the roof with a layer of soil nearly two feet thick. When the task was completed, a celebration with food, drink, music, and dance would ensue.

The Church

The history of Christianity in the plain of Karin leads back at least to the fourth century. According to local tradition, upon the return of Gregory the Illuminator from Caesarea, where he was ordained bishop and the first patriarch of the Armenian Church, he founded Karmir Vank (Red Monastery) near the village of Hindzk. Other sources show that the monasteries of Khachkavank, Lusavorchavank, and Karmir Vank were among the numerous religious edifices built or renovated in the tenth century during the predominance of the Bagratuni dynasty. Aside from their spiritual, intellectual, and educational mission, these institutions played an important socioeconomic role in village life. In the past, the peasantry not only worked the monastic

lands but also supplied the church with needed artisans, craftsmen, and supportive services.

Pilgrimages to these and other holy sites were a part of the yearly cycle. After performing the religious rituals and making their pious offerings and sacrifice (*matagh*), hundreds of peasants would join in festivities, including games and dance. The city folk of Karin, with their assumed haughty societal superiority, their advanced educational-cultural establishments, and their relative Westernization, nonetheless also perpetuated the traditions of folk culture. During certain *deri* (feast) days, families in well-supplied carriages would travel to monasteries or retreats. The Lusavorchavank was the closest to the city, and the lively Koch Kochan stream in the valley nearby was the favorite swimming, washing, and amusement site for young maidens and women. Men preferred the deep natural pools below the rainbow spray of the breathtaking Koch Kochan waterfall.

The center of Dzitogh was dominated by Church of the Holy Mother of God—Surb Astvatsatsin. Unlike the city and other villages, Dzitogh had no Catholic or Protestant families and remained monolithically attached to the Mother Armenian Apostolic Church. There were normally six priests, one for each of the parishes in the village. Remodeled with red stone on the façade in 1860, Surb Astvatsatsin was a large edifice with three altars adorned with pictures of the Madonna and Christ Child and other holy personages. The interior was plastered white, with lanterns hanging from the ceiling and the floor covered with small carpets and mats, where individual families each had their place. The church was proud and protective of the five manuscripts in its possession. As was the custom, men and women separated upon entry into the sanctuary, with the women and girls taking their place in the upper-storey loft. From the large belfry, the peel of the church bells could be heard in neighboring villages. The elderly attended morning and evening services throughout the year, but the regularity of attendance by the villagers was also dictated by the agricultural cycle.

Christmas and Easter were the most eagerly-awaited holidays. On Christmas Eve, January 5, the choir strolled with lighted candles through the village, stopping at individual homes to sing *Khorhurd Mets ev Skancheli* (Great and Sublime Mystery) and

to receive sweets and gifts in return. On Christmas Day, the entire family was in church to celebrate the birth and baptism of Christ and to partake of Holy Communion and of the blessed holy water for health throughout the year. The eve of Lent provided a final opportunity for merrymaking, as the boys went from house to house, singing and dancing, and receiving *gata*, a sweetbread that would not be tasted again for seven weeks. On the first morning of Lent, an *akhloj*, a large onion pierced with seven chicken feathers, six white and one black, was hung from the skylight. Each week a white feather was removed until only the black one remained for Holy Week and until the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. Forty days after Easter, the feast of the Christ's Ascension (Hambardzum) was marked by picnics and circle dances to the shrill daul-zurna music outside the church.

All the milestones of life—birth and baptism, matchmaking and the contractual dinner (*khosk-kap*), the meticulously observed wedding rituals, and funerals drew together much of the village. An age-old custom, which in modified form still continues, is the mourning ritual for the deceased. Neighbors and relatives joined in preparing the deceased and accompanying the family to the church for the religious rites, to the cemetery for burial, and back home to share in the memorial meal—*pededi hats* or *hogejash*.

Education and Self-Defense

Schools were opened in the villages of the Karin plain in the second half of the nineteenth century. Beginning in the earlier part of the century, Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries made their appearance in Erzerum, establishing their religious outposts for missionary and educational endeavors. Forbidden by Islamic law to proselytize Muslims, they turned their attention to the Christian Armenians. In due course, the city had the Catholic boys' school, the Catholic girls' school and kindergarten, the Protestant boys' school, the Protestant girls' school and kindergarten, and the French lycée, aside from the several national (*azgayin*) schools of the Armenian Church. The Sanasarian *Varzharan* (School or Academy), a bastion of contemporary learning since 1881, boasted a distinguished teaching staff and

graduates.

The Sanasarian and other schools in Erzerum and in Constantinople were out of reach to almost all peasant families. An occasional fortunate village boy would be taken into a seminary. Particularly renowned was the Karmir Vank seminary (*zharangavorats*) where ecclesiastical and cultural luminaries such as Grigor Vkayaser, Grigor Magistros, Ohan Odznetsi, Anania Shirakatsi, Khosrov Andzevatsi, Grigor Narekatsi, Aristakes Lastivertsi, and Mekhitar Sebastatsi (founder of the Mekhitarist order) are said to have studied or taught. The monastery also operated an orphanage, a hospital, and a sanctuary for lepers.

By the end of the nineteenth century, many villages in the plain had schools, though primitive and with a limited curriculum. In Dzitogh, there were both a boys' school with about 160 students and a girls' school with about 150 students. The boys' school situated on one side of the church was an impressive structure with red stones, while the more modest school for girls was located on the opposite side of the church. At first there were no desks or books, and each student had to bring a mat or sheepskin upon which to sit, but the teachers were progressive, graduates of the Nersesian Academy of Tiflis and of the Karmir Vank seminary, providing instruction in the Armenian and Turkish languages, mathematics, and religion. At the turn of the twentieth century and especially after the restoration of the Ottoman constitution in 1908, educational activity took a great leap forward. The United Armenian Alliance in Constantinople sponsored numerous schools in the provinces and for a time assumed responsibility for the boys' school in Dzitogh. The school was renovated and furnished with desks, chairs, and blackboards. The principal was Arshavir Shamlian, an enlightened pedagogue from Karin who had studied in Constantinople, and then Haik Zhamkochian from the Nersesian Academy. Other teachers, including Arsham Sirunian (the future Archbishop Mampre, Prelate of Egypt), were graduates of the Sanasarian Varzharan or Karmir Vank. The four-year curriculum included Turkish and Armenian, reading and composition, history, geography, mathematics, penmanship, art, and music. The girls' school was directed by Nvart Ghenevizian, who was assisted by three graduates of the Hripsimian school in Karin city.

The growing insecurity and oppression in the Ottoman Empire, coupled with the increasing enlightenment of the population, contributed to socio-political movements among the Armenians in the nineteenth century. Numerous societies were formed in Karin/Erzerum—educational, cultural, social—including establishments for counseling youth, married people, and alcoholics, and groups distributing political tracts relating to human rights and personal and collective emancipation. Several of these groups spilled over into the villages. In Dzitogh, one of the earliest political organizers was Aram Aramian, who was affiliated with the short-lived clandestine society known as Pashtpan Hayreniats (Protectors of the Fatherland). After the formation of regular Armenian political parties between 1885 and 1890, the village adhered overwhelmingly to the Dashnaktsutium—Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF)—with two or three families being sympathizers of the Hnchakian party. Several ARF cells operated in the village, becoming most active during the lull in the agrarian cycle in late autumn and winter. They acquired and hid various kinds of guns and ammunition, with the activist Harutiun Der Vartanian becoming legendary for his resourcefulness in transporting weapons across the border from Russia. Party field workers from Karin city and from abroad always found a cordial welcome and haven in Dzitogh.

The villagers were put to the test in 1895, when at the end of October they could see dark smoke rising above the Armenian quarter of Karin. The massacres of 1895-96 had begun in Trebizond at the beginning of the month and spread rapidly to the towns and villages in Erzerum province. The youth of Dzitogh, resolving to defend the village, hastened to the empty irrigation canals that they used as trenches in face of the rabble approaching from Umudum and Dinarkom, where the few Armenian homes had been plundered and burned. After several days, the frustrated attackers withdrew, sparing Dzitogh and several Armenian settlements to its rear. Yet a few months later, gendarmes entered the village, searching for weapons and hauling a number of suspected revolutionaries off to prison for one to five years. In 1904 the village was again attacked and again resisted. It also dispatched a group of armed young men to defend the yaila from encroachments by neighboring Turkish settlements.

1915

The Young Turk revolution in 1908 offered hope to the Armenian villagers, as Garegin Pasdermajian (Armen Garo) was elected to represent the Armenians of Erzerum in the Ottoman Parliament. In this period of optimism, newspapers were published, reading rooms (*entertsaran*) and lecture halls (*lsaran*) were opened, and theatrical groups, composed mostly of students, made exchange appearances. For a brief time, the Armenians, together with many other elements in the Ottoman Empire, thought that the slogan, "Liberty, Equality, Justice," would ring true. But war clouds soon gathered again. Already during the Balkan wars in 1912-13, thousands of young Armenians from Erzerum province were drafted into the Ottoman army while many others evaded military service by slipping over the Russian frontier. The eruption of World War I in the summer of 1914 led to a general mobilization in the Ottoman Empire, taking even more young people away from the native village. Most foreign residents left Erzerum and the routes of communication were closed for Armenians. In August, the plain of Karin witnessed with great apprehension a two-minute solar eclipse. Foreboding became reality when Turkey openly joined the conflagration two months later at the end of October 1914.

Before the Turkish attack on Russia, the Ottoman Third Army concentrated in Erzerum province. In September, the 11th Division made Dzitogh its headquarters and forced the Armenian villagers to billet and feed the troops. Unheeded protests about offensive behavior toward women led many families to send younger women to neighboring villages or to the city. In November, the 11th Division left for the front but the respite was brief because the dreaded irregular mounted *chete* soon appeared to harass and plunder. What was worse, a command was received in mid-December for the population to leave the village in two days' time. Winter had already set in, the youth was gone, and few oxen and wagons remained. The villagers could do nothing more than to scatter to other Armenian villages in the plain or try to find shelter in the city. The military authorities turned Dzitogh into a hospital-sanitarium, as countless wounded and frostbitten soldiers from Enver Pasha's ill-fated Sarikamish cam-

paign were brought there to languish and die. When in March of 1915 the villagers were allowed to return, they found corpses and utter devastation in every home. But with their ageless patience, they cleaned home and church and again prepared for the sowing season.

The hope of resuming a semi-normal existence was quashed at the beginning of May when gendarmes surrounded Dzitogh and ordered the inhabitants to prepare to depart. The confused villagers sent messengers to the Armenian prelacy in the city to give notice that they were prepared to resist, but the Armenian national administration cautioned against aggravating the situation for everyone and advised submitting to temporary relocation. Thus, the Armenians of Dzitogh, Dinarkom, Hindzk, Tvanj, and Artsuti were driven westward under a torrential rain lasting for three days. They were not allowed to halt until they had reached Ilija. The caravan was attacked by Muslim refugee *muhajirs* and chete bands, and as it moved toward Mamakhatun was joined by deportees from many other villages. The oxen and wagons were soon seized, and the elderly, weak, and children who could not continue the journey began to fall victim to the cruelty of the gendarmes. By the time the Dzitoghtsis arrived at a place known as Jebije Boghaz, the number of deportees from the province reached into the thousands. They were attacked repeatedly by chete bands and Kurdish tribesmen. Those who survived the murder and mayhem were driven onward to the plain of Erzinjan where the killing continued, now with machine guns. At the treacherous Kemakh gorge, nearly all of those still surviving were ambushed and cut down or thrown off the cliff into the Euphrates River. The same fate awaited the inhabitants of Karin city in June and July.

The caravans of death were routed to the "convenience stations" of the Syrian desert, Deir el-Zor, the intended definitive resting place for the Armenian nation, prepared by the xenophobic triumvirate of Talaat, Enver, and Jemal and their enthusiastic cohorts. The few Dzitoghtsis who completed the decimating trek and those who were taken into Turkish, Kurdish, and Bedouin households eventually made their way to far-flung places, where all that was left to them from the homeland were their memories of a seemingly unending cycle of life that had ended.



Plain of Karin from the City



Approach to Dzitogh



Dzitogh Boys' School



Artsuti Armenian Catholic Church



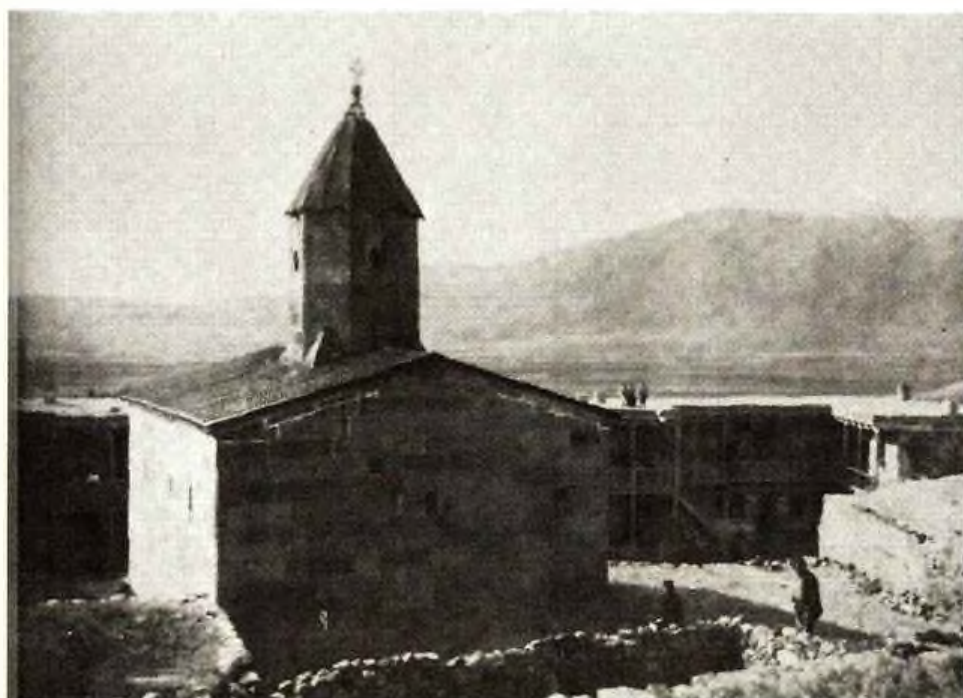
Dinarkom Armenian Apostolic Church



Plain of Karin Peasant Dress



Karin City Formal Dress



Karmir Vank near Hindzk



Lusavorchavank near Mudurga